Of Raspberry Berets, Purple Rain, and Little Red Corvettes

Vh1’s *Why We Love the 80’s* and other mindless television misadventures will have you believe that the 80’s was a mixed bag of excellence, ranging from Fraggle Rock to *The Breakfast Club* to the first official sightings of Bono, which of course would have disastrous unforeseen consequences in the future. However, one tiny man dressed in bellbottom flares and purple ass-less pants stood at the forefront of all this phenomena. That ass belonged to Prince.

The gifted offspring of two gifted musicians, Prince was destined for greatness the moment he entered the world on June 7th, 1958. Born in Minneapolis, his father, John Nelson, named his son “Prince” because “he wanted [him] to do everything he wanted to do.” In 2009, Prince revealed for the first time during an interview with radio personality Tavis Smiley his early battles with epilepsy: "My mother told me one day I walked in to her and said, 'Mom, I'm not going to be sick anymore,' and she said 'Why?' and I said 'Because an angel told me so.' Now, I don't remember saying it, that's just what she told me."

These early Hallmark-card struggles, as early Hallmark-card struggles are wont to do, eventually manifested themselves in glorious, Playboy-esque ways. To fend off the cruel jokes of his classmates, Prince adapted a true ballerific philosophy, constantly striving to be “as flashy as [he] could and as noisy as [he] could." This early propensity for swagger, coupled with a musical house that included the variegated, yet timeless rhythms of legends such as Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and Carlos Santana, birthed what would eventually become a worldwide household name.

Prince released his first album *For You* in 1979 at the age of nineteen. Even for die-hard Prince fans, the album is rarely mentioned, although in retrospect the album contains the bizarre blueprint from which the artist would build his career upon in later years. An eclectic mix of instruments, producing sounds that range from disco to soul to pop music, Prince would only augment his vacillating musical leanings in future recordings. The puppy love of opposing sonic styles would soon materialize into the hardcore, climatic level of raunchiness displayed in Prince’s *Purple Rain* in 1984.

It is difficult to implement calls for moments of silence through the written word, and to my knowledge it has never been accomplished successfully, but *Purple Rain*, in all its various forms, deserves such praise and meditation. In the current era, where musicians frequently sacrifice artistic integrity in an effort to satiate the low-attention spans of the ringtone/iTunes/Youtube generation, an album like *Purple Rain*, constructed almost like a greatest hits album, is a rare spectacle indeed. Some of Prince’s most recognizable songs are featured on this record. “I Would Die 4 U” “When Doves Cry” and “Purple Rain” are such songs, the latter of which, according to a pre-eminent scholar and cultural analyst, “one of the most perfect of pop songs. “The kind you find in a second hand store"﻿ is a verse that rolls of the tongue like butter” (flipcritic, 1).

If the well-earned 45 “Likes” flipcritic garnered on YouTube for ingeniously managing to sum of up the brilliant scope of the song in less than 140 characters isn’t enough to convince you of the widespread influence Prince has had on the world, let me put it in perspective. Daydreams of wedding bells and receptions have never occupied much time at all in my brain. However, when a song like “Purple Rain” comes on, this quickly changes. I start to envision the whole scene, my lovely bride donned in a purple dress (ass-less pants optional, for the time being). With each verse, Prince addresses the main figures of his life, with an epic guitar solo during the final minutes, even epic-er than Slash’s guitar solo during the final moments of Guns N’ Roses “November Rain,” if you were for some reason to compare gloriously overproduced rain-themed songs. I am completely transfixed by the song and its wonders. Often times I have laid prostrate, utterly immune to the goings on of the outer world while listening to the last few minutes of “Purple Rain.” If armed invaders were to encroach upon me in moments of listening, I would be completely vulnerable to their violent whims, yet calmly indifferent as well:

“Hello sir, please allow me to listen last few seconds of Prince’s stellar guitar work before you blow my fucking brains out. Thank you.”

Eccentricity in the entertainment world, especially in the music business, is often times the stasis, and when one considers the meteoric rise of an artist like Prince, the influence of it cannot be denied. Classical composers like Mozart and Glenn Gould were noted for their booming performances, which I imagined caused young women in tightly-strapped bodices to swoon in concert halls. Even in the conservative 1950’s American society, when *Leave it to Beaver* was the ball-chokingly moral standard by which families often aspired to, Little Richard simultaneously shocked and thrilled audiences with his wild stage performances and feminine howling. The basic paradigm of the eccentric music star would present itself repeatedly in the coming years. David Bowie and his makeup. Morrissey and his mullet. Lady Gaga and her meat.

As in the latter case, the artist’s desire to separate themselves often borders on a fabricated attempt to set themselves apart from the crowd, and consequentially appeal to the masses. Within our genetic makeup, we are inherently disposed to attempts to establish our respective identities. Everyone aspires to be different, but in our similar goals we inevitably become the same. This phenomenon often leads to unforgivable mistakes, such as a generation of kids in the 90s wearing MC Hammer-style pants. Sometimes I feel as though the only tangible differences between Rihanna and Katy Perry is the respective colors they decide to dye their hair each month. With an artist like Lady Gaga, comparatively, one cannot help but notice the similarities between the two artists. The same eccentric mannerisms, same outlandish outfits, same ignition of penis-or-not speculations, but with that said, Prince’s appeal goes far beyond the tangible, like uncooked meat dresses.

My first encounter with Prince’s music came at a young age. My mother used to drive me to school every morning. During such trips, she listened to an old school radio station called Magic 92.5. Magic 92.5 exposed me to a lot of masters like Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder, artists who would eventually become staples in my iPod playlists, and in a temporary period of confusion, my Zune as well. But at that age none of these legends compared to songs I heard by Prince. The first song I remember hearing from Prince was “Raspberry Beret,” which is still my favorite to this day. Aside from all the disturbing imagery I used in this essay to sing the praises of “Purple Rain,” (pun intended) it is a scientific fact that a person cannot feel sadness when hearing the song. When “Raspberry Beret” came on the radio, the tragedies of adolescence were obsolete. Problems such as the time I scraped my knee after chasing Kim Gallagher on the playground, or the time I watched Bone-Thugs-N-Harmony’s “Crossroads” video for the first time, or the time Tapanga broke up with Corey, were wiped away momentarily as I listened to Prince sing “I think I looooooOve her” on the radio.

Later, in 1999, the world was preparing for Y2K. Despite not really knowing what it was until much later, I was nonetheless scared. During the last moments of 1999, I was on a plane trip from San Diego to Little Rock to visit my grandparents. Throughout the trip, visions of passengers falling through the air took hold of my consciousness. I figured this Y2K, whatever it was, would no doubt manifest itself in a terrible plane crash. However, the flight crew took precautions to prevent this, of course with responsible steering and whatnot, but mostly with the music of Prince. A spunky flight attendant took it upon himself to commence an unofficial dance contest at the front of the plane. I can’t remember any of the songs that play during that ride except for “1999.” When the song came on, mostly everyone was laughing and singing along, forgetting completely about the very apparent possibility of Y2K. This moment has resonated with me for the entirety of my life.

Homeric tropes align themselves well with *Purple Rain* the film, in my humble yet possibly delusional opinion. Prince can only be viewed as a purple leathered pant wearing Odysseus, who strives to make it home to the bountiful bosom of Appolonia, a bosom that, thanks to the remarkable accomplishments in the fields of science and technology over the years, has maintained its bountiful-ness long after its logical expiration date. The film is largely autobiographical, as Prince struggles to establish his career in the face of family adversities and musical rivalries. Luckily, I watched the film at an early age, and was able to revisit its magic in a steady and healthy fashion as the years progressed. My good friend, Nakul, was not as lucky. He first saw the film in high school, and as most men, was powerless to its effect. He ended up watching the film over and over in moments of free time, totaling over fifteen viewings in a very short period.

The eccentricity in Prince’s films increased exponentially over the years, but sadly, the quality always didn’t. 1986’s *Under The Cherry Moon* and 1987’s *Sign ‘O’ Of the Times* are classics in their own right, with quality soundtracks to match. However, if Purple Rain was Prince’s Odyssey and *Illiad* rolled into one, then 1990’s Graffiti Bridge is the story so shitty that the Greeks felt it necessary to destroy forever in an effort to preserve prosperity (unfortunately, Tyler Perry’s two sitcoms and other cultural abominations prove that such discretions do not exist in the modern age). Although the soundtrack to Graffiti Bridge is one of Prince’s best albums, the sequel to Purple Rain performed so low at the box office, that Prince wisely elected never to dabble in the film business again. Minor failings, and major failings of the sort that lose upwards of millions, Prince’s collective filmography holds a precious spot in the hearts of Prince fans, similar to the film *Precious,* based on the novel *Push*, by Sapphire.

Aside from cult film fascinations and steady album sales, Prince has kept himself visible in the public eye in other formats, like in 2007 when he performed during the half-time show of Super Bowl 42. In that unfortunate time of American history, lovable yet ancient rockers were asked to occupy the coveted half-time show because the unruly, wardrobe-malfunctioning, nip-slip prone youngsters couldn’t be trusted with the most watched televised event in the nation (thank God Fergie, LMFAO and Nicki Minaj have brought us back into respectability once again). During the performance, Prince entertained with some of his most beloved songs like “Purple Rain” and “Let’s Go Crazy,” while also performing Jimi Hendrix’s (excuse, me Bob Dylan’s) “All Along the Watchtower” and Ike & Tina Turner’s (excuse me, Creedence Clearwater Revival’s) “Proud Mary.” Although never too far from the collective thoughts of American audiences, Prince regained a bit of resurgence when Dave Chappelle penned a skit about him in his legendary but short-lived comedic sketch show, The Dave Chappelle Show. During the skit, Charlie Murphy, alleged brother of Eddie Murphy, recounts the story of how he was bested in a game of basketball with Prince, a story that is too bizarre and hilarious not to believe. When Prince meets Charlie Murphy at a night club, wearing his famous purple garb, Murphy is shocked that when Prince arrives to the basketball court, he “still got on the same shit he was wearing at the club.” Despite the fact that I watched the episode the day it first aired, I had to revisit it with the aid of re-runs, on account of laughing so hard I almost died. Prince, after magically dominating the court, kindly offers Charlie Murphy a post-game meal of pancakes and grapes.

Prince has also been known to pop up in other oddball ways, like in a few episodes of *The Simpsons*. In one such episode, Homer’s fashionable ode to Prince in the form of his own purple blouse and ass-less pants, is none to welcome, and unfortunately Homer is strangled by Prince’s bodyguard.

Kesha, the lovable mess of a pop-star who is responsible for some of the worst abominable tunes known to music, that somehow miraculously transform into masterpieces after one too many shots of Tequila, cites Prince as one of her biggest artistic influences. In a radio interview with Ryan Seacrest, a man single-handedly responsible for the rising unemployment in America, Kesha related the time where she met Prince. Kesha broke into Prince’s house, sneaking under the fence. Probably shocked by the level of the beast before him, Prince ordered Kesha to be escorted off the premises. It hasn’t been confirmed whether Kesha was handled in the same way as Homer Simpson, but one can dream.

In the summer of 2008, myself and a group of other brave souls decided to pay a mere $300 dollars to spend a week in the desert of Black Rock City, Nevada, for the annual Burning Man festival. If you haven’t heard of Burning Man, I can properly summarize in a few words. It is a festival where people, often engage in a great amount of irresponsible behavior. Using the annual Burning Man Pamphlet as my guide, I stumbled on a few words of divinity, advertising the annual “Burning Man Topless Walk.” My subsequent facial expression must have perfectly conveyed my disbelief and intrigue, because Neal, Nakul’s older brother, only had this to say:

“Oh. So you want to know what paradise is like?” he said.

Filled with the glorious toxins of certain anonymous substances, Nakul and I stumbled upon a few more words of divinity in the pamphlet. “Come to the Prince Party! A DJ will be playing all of the Prince classics as we party like it’s 1-9-9-9! Plenty of ‘Purple Rain’ for everyone!”

Needless to say, Heaven on Earth, in all ways imaginable, was in our grasp.

Later, while awaiting the “Prince Party,” my campmates and I soothed our eager spirits with illegal spirits, but mostly talk of Prince. Inevitably the discussion turned to marijuana-infused debate, as we all defended our choices for our favorite Prince songs. Nakul’s older brother shocked me when he said that “KISS” was his favorite song.

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah, why not?” he said.

“Out of all of Prince’s songs, “KISS” is your favorite?

“I love the kiss sounds he makes. They’re genius.”

Soon the time came for us to make our several mile trek across the desert to the party of our dreams. The Burning Man festival is designed like an imagined clock, with different campsites positioned on different areas around the clock. This seems logical, because the only way that naked, drugged-out hippies can decipher matters of geography, or anything for that matter, is to relate simple concepts that they have firmly grasped early in life during sober moments. During our trek, we had a difficult time locating the party. Like slaves working in the field, we hummed Prince songs through call-and-response as we tried desperately to find the location.

“I was dreaming when I wrote this, so sue me if I go to fast,”

“But life is just a party, and parties were meant to laaast”

We eventually reached our destination, much too our disappointed surprise. The garden of Prince memorabilia that we had all envisioned didn’t exist. There were no Prince songs playing in the tent, and no Purple Rain anywhere in sight. Infuriated, I saunter up to the DJ and in a calm, polite tone, asked him exactly what the fuck was going on. Apparently, we had been duped. There was no Prince party, and probably the greatest sin of all, the DJ had never even heard of Prince.

Prince, the man, the myth, the *legend*, is still prone to moments of profound weakness. Because of his genuine kindness, Prince wrote “Manic Monday,” the biggest hit of the all-female group, The Bangles, career. It has been generally accepted that Prince wrote the song so that he could sleep with Susana Hoffs, the lead singer. Although, in retrospect, anyone that has seen Hoff’s infamous lingerie scene in the 1987 film “The Allnighter,” cannot blame Prince too much for this sleaziness. Other missteps cannot be overlooked however, even for Prince-obsessed fans like myself. Despite the enormous amounts of money he has amassed over the years, in 2007 Prince went on a tirade against free file-sharing websites such as Youtube on the bullshit-laden premise that these sites unfairly comprise the artistic integrity of his art. This is the same artist, who I have deliberately abstained from mentioning, that underwent one of the most profound periods of bullshit to be recorded in history. In the 90’s, Prince decided to change his name into a symbol, for reasons that he even he isn’t too sure of. In late-night talk-show monologues and SNL skits subsequentially referred to him as “the artist formely known as Prince.” It pains me to speak about such an atrocious level of attention-seeking in an artist I admire, so I won’t elaborate, but such astounding gaffes of the human imagination makes me fear the peculiar shapes of fuckery future generations will have to contend with. I sincerely regret the day when I have to explain to my future son the benefits of multi-tasking. Getting brain, talking on the phone, and still having racks on racks on *racks* is something to be desired.

Prince, like this essay, is a deeply unorganized collection of features that when analyzed together, is near impossible to infer much meaning from. Since his commencement in the public eye, he has done nothing short of shock the human imagination, and consequentially, harvested a nation of devotees. The fact that a man can rise from nothing, and in turn, fashion himself a pair of pants with nothing to cover his ass, is remarkable to say the least. Despite imposters, there has never been an artist like Prince, the Justin Bieber era in which we live shows no signs that this will ever change, but of course, littler men with much bigger wallets have taught me to never say never. Like I mentioned earlier, one can dream.